A Community Service of Commemoration
Sunday, September 11, 2011

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Fourth Presbyterian Church

On Sunday evening, September 11, 2011, four faith communities hosted a service of commemoration at Fourth Church in observance of the tenth anniversary of 9/11. Representatives of each community—Chicago Sinai Congregation, the Downtown Islamic Center, Fourth Presbyterian Church, and Holy Name Cathedral—offered a reflection. Here are the reflection, based on Isaiah 35:1–10, and opening prayer offered by John Buchanan.

Opening Prayer
You are the mystery beyond all the names we call you. You are the reality beyond all the rituals and traditions we devise to address you. You are the truth beyond all our doctrines and dogmas and theologies.

So we come before you this evening, humbly.

We are grateful that you have created this world and everything in it, that you have created us, every one of us, in your image. We are grateful for all the wonderful, beautiful ways that image is expressed, in our diversity, our different colors and languages, our different holy writings, our wondrously diverse music and poetry and art.

We are here this evening because we deeply believe you want us to be together and not apart, isolated, strangers to one another.

We are here to commemorate an event that wounded us deeply, all of us, but also to reach out to one another and to give you thanks for bringing us together this evening.

We pray for your blessing and your presence in our midst. We pray in your holy name.

Amen.

Scripture Reading
The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
    the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
    and rejoice with joy and singing.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
    the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the Lord,
    the majesty of our God.

Strengthen the weak hands,
    and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
     “Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.
    He will come with vengeance,
    with terrible recompense.
        He will come and save you.”

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
    and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
    and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
    and streams in the desert;
the burning sand shall become a pool,
    and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
    the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

A highway shall be there,
    and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
    but it shall be for God’s people;
        no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.
    No lion shall be there,
        nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
        they shall not be found there,
        but the redeemed shall walk there.
And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
    and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
    they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.
Isaiah 35:1–10 (NRSV)

Reflection

When I think about the future and my hope, I think about my thirteen grandchildren. I think about them growing, maturing, going to college, becoming teachers, doctors, lawyers, bankers, maybe artists, musicians, police officers, fire fighters, finding someone to love and spend their lives with. My hope is that they will be healthy and happy, that their world is peaceful, and that they will never have to experience the kind of event we remember today and commemorate this evening. I hope they live in a world a little less fragile and treacherous than this one.

And I hope that this interfaith occasion is no longer unique, but common; that people of different faith traditions will know one another, understand one another, respect one another—love one another.

We share a belief that God works in and through events that God does not want or will and certainly does not cause, that the creator God is mercifully present to bring about peace and reconciliation even in tragedy and suffering.

This gathering, this evening, is an expression of that faith. Prior to 9/11 we would not have been inclined to bring together our respective communities. Prior to 9/11 we didn't pay much attention to one another, with a few happy exceptions. So part of my hope is that the relationships forged out of the terrible tragedy of 9/11 will grow and blossom and become genuine relationships of respect and love.

The distinguished Roman Catholic theologian Hans Küng said two decades ago that there will never be peace among nations until there is peace among world religions.

My hope for peace includes the hope that the individual religious traditions, beginning with my own, will learn to speak less exclusively and dogmatically; that we will hold tightly to our beliefs, doctrines, traditions but at the same time stop inferring and saying that if you do not share our beliefs, abandon your beliefs and traditions, your identity, you are in the wrong and God's steadfast love does not extend to you as fully as it does to us.

As for my religious family, my hope is that Christians of all denominations, communities, and traditions will come to understand that God's love, which we see and experience in Jesus Christ, is for all and that God will not abandon or shun any human being, any child of God, regardless of the name we use for our creator.

My hope is that Christians will affirm and embrace other Christians and Jews and Muslims, not in spite of what we believe about Jesus, but because of what we believe.

The promise in that lovely passage from Hebrew scripture, from the prophet Isaiah, is that a day is coming when all of God's children, my grandchildren and your grandchildren, not just our branch of the family or yours, but all—the entire, wonderful, diverse, colorful, speaking-in-different-accents, singing different music family—that the whole human family will sit down at the banquet table and eat and drink and live together in peace.

This is my hope.